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More than a Farmer's Wife: Voices of American Farm Women, 1910–1960

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More than a Farmer's Wife: Voices of American Farm Women, 1910–1960, by Amy Mattson Lauters. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009. 191 pp. Illustration, tables, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Jenny Barker Devine is assistant professor of history at Illinois College and the author of "Quite a Ripple but No Revolution: The Changing Roles of Women in the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, 1921–1951" (*Annals of Iowa*, 2005).

In *More than a Farmer's Wife*, Amy Mattson Lauters closely examines the content of several mainstream and farm periodicals for female audiences between 1910 and 1960, and compares the images and ideal notions portrayed in those magazines with the lived experiences of American farm women. Lauters found that throughout the first half of the twentieth century, farm journalists, both male and female, acknowledged the difficulties of rural life, but generally portrayed farm women as independent, hardworking partners on family farms who desired educational opportunities and political outlets.

For this clearly written, concise study, Lauters exhaustively surveyed several magazines, including *Country Gentleman*, *The Farmer's Wife*, *Farm Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. Articles intended for female audiences focused on three themes: rural versus urban women, citizenship and political participation, and women in the business of farming. Whereas mainstream magazines recognized farm women's work on family farms, the periodicals directed specifically at a rural audience placed a greater emphasis on farm women's unique position in society as laborers, partners with their husbands, and civic actors. Farm journalists asserted that because "city life drained the soul," and urban women shared few concerns with their husbands, farm women could easily claim superiority over their urban sisters (102). This became increasingly evident in the years following the Second World War, when mainstream periodicals replaced their coverage of women's political involvement with material related to housekeeping and childrearing. On the other hand, farm women's magazines also increased the number of stories with domestic themes but maintained assertions that women played important roles in shaping public policy.

Mindful that periodicals typically contain idealized images, Lauters interviewed and corresponded with farm women across the country to compare lived experiences with popular portrayals. She located informants through her social networks, by visiting retirement communities, and by publishing a request in *Country Woman*, a popular magazine distributed by Reiman Publications in Greenfield, Wisconsin. More than 200 women responded to the advertisement in *Country*

Woman, providing a wealth of written and oral records of women's lives. The final chapters that deal with the lived experiences of farm women are dynamic and compelling, as they demonstrate the diverse perspectives of a supposedly collective group of "farm women." The women typically agreed on the value of work, independence, thrift, and family, and the importance of their roles within the family. Not surprisingly, Lauters also found significant variations in lived experiences, from women who despised farm life to those who found it as idyllic as portrayed in the magazines. Most women stated that they did not measure up to the images in magazines they read, but that periodicals allowed women to create an imagined community based on such images that placed value on their difficult, constant, and undervalued work.

Lauters provides a perceptive analysis of the periodicals, oral histories, and letters written by farm women, but the study would have benefited from a greater engagement with other historical works on gender and agriculture. Numerous scholars, including Mary Neth and Katherine Jellison, have also examined farm women's lives during this period and concluded that over time, farm journalists gradually wrote women out of farm magazines because they assumed that rural women increasingly had identical interests with their urban and suburban counterparts. A more thorough examination of the secondary sources, especially works by scholars such as Nancy Grey Osterud, Melissa Walker, and Deborah Fink, would have provided a richer contextual backdrop for the sections that consider how the media helped rural communities find cohesiveness and in the final chapters that examine oral histories and letters.

Lauters rightly asserts that the lived experiences reveal deep economic and social class divisions, often based on land ownership, inheritance, and family dynamics. She concludes, "There was solidarity evident in the struggle with the land, but it was equally evident that the constructions of farming, and farm women, offered in the national farming magazines applied only to those who could afford to farm" (160). This is a significant finding in keeping with existing research. Furthermore, the examples of women with a strong distaste for farm life offer startling contrasts to popular images, as well as new evidence for a little-studied aspect of rural women's lives. This adds to our overall understanding and illuminates the diversity of their experiences, but the limited attention to the oral histories and letters, as well as the lack of secondary material, leaves readers with an incomplete picture of broader changes in agriculture and rural life and the importance of gender relations within that context.